

# How to Increase the Response Rate for Online Surveys

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## Perspective

Response rates to online surveys hover around the 20% range. In this article, I will show you a process that we, at KC Surveys, use that will help you achieve an approximately 40% response rate to your online surveys—which is, therefore, much more likely to be representative of the thinking and opinions of your survey population.

A 20% response rate is problematic for several reasons. The principal one is that it affects the accuracy and therefore the reliability of your survey results. How can you feel comfortable with your survey results if up to 80% of your population or of your sample does not respond to your survey?

## Structuring your Survey

You want to make the survey as easy as possible for participants to complete. This means that the survey must be of an appropriate length and that the first part of the survey especially should be easy to complete.

In the first part of the survey start with yes-and-no questions, if appropriate, and use scaled questions which are relatively easy to complete. Ranking questions and open-ended questions should be placed later in the survey.

With ranking questions, you want to keep them to usually no more than seven items. Ranking more than seven items tends to become intimidating for some participants.

It is best to keep your open-ended questions to a maximum of three and to quantify them. For example, a sample open-ended question would read, “what are one, two or three reasons for...”. Wording your open-ended questions this way ensures that more survey participants will complete them. And a greater response rate improves the reliability of your results.

## Piloting your Survey

We have found that piloting your survey with a sampling of your potential participants is a vital component of the survey process. It helps ensure that the survey is clear to everyone, that it is on topic with the questions that are used and that it is an appropriate length. Piloting your survey before implementing it ensures that the survey process works without glitches and that the results are both more valid and reliable.

## **Providing Advance Notice**

Providing advanced notice of the survey in our experience and confirmed by research improves your response rate. This advanced notice should be sent out about a week before the survey is launched. It should be signed by the most senior personnel in your organization so that participants can be ensured that the results will be taken seriously by the people who can implement the survey results. And it should state explicitly that the participants will be notified about the survey results and regularly updated about what is being done to redress the deficiencies discovered through the survey.

## **Offering Additional Options**

Our experience, and confirmed by research, is that some potential participants tend to resist responding to online surveys because they fear their responses might be hacked. To overcome this resistance, where possible, we provide a pdf version with our online surveys with an address and a fax number to return their completed survey. In our experience, up to 20% of the participants use these options to respond to our online surveys.

## **Hosting a draw**

We have found that hosting a draw for those who completed the survey increased our response rate. We usually host at least three draws and publish the winners at the end of the survey. The prizes for these draws do not have to be expensive and are often prized items that organizations have on hand.

## **Setting Deadlines and Providing Reminders**

You must always set timelines for completing a survey. We are all busier than we would like to be so if you don't provide a timeline to complete a survey it's unlikely it will be completed. We have found that three weeks is about the right timeline to complete a survey.

Emailing reminders which includes the number of responses to date will increase your response rate. We usually send out two reminders. This first reminder goes out at the two-week mark and will provide quite a bump to your number of responses. The second reminder goes out the day before the deadline and will provide some additional responses.

## **Employing a Last Personal Reminder**

From our experience and with the research in Martin et al, a social science classic, we have instituted a change to our survey process that has resulted in a noticeably increased response rate to our online surveys.

Within two days after the deadline for submitting completed surveys, we contacted those clients who had not completed the survey by emailing them a short (no more than

three sentences) plea to complete the survey as quickly as possible. In this plea we used the first name of these clients three times and indicated how many of their colleagues had completed the survey so far.

This final personal, short reminder has increased our response rate by 25-to-35%.

### **Summary**

Obtaining a significant response rate to online surveys is vitally important for the accuracy and reliability of your survey results. Using the various strategies outlined in this article will, in our experience, increase your response rate to your online surveys into approximately the 40% range. And this dramatic increase in response rate significantly improves the accuracy and reliability of your survey results.

### **Bibliography**

Martin, Steve J., Noah J. Goldstein and Robert B. Cialdini, *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014.